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Adjusting isn't easy, but ex-offenders offer key job skills

September 25, 2005



After spending 18 years behind bars on a second-degree murder conviction, Tim Smith was released from prison in January and counts himself lucky these days.

"I had a home, family and job waiting for me when I was released," said Smith, now living outside the Bay Area. "I couldn't have made it without all that."

State prison officials know all too well how difficult it is for former inmates to adjust to the outside world. Sixty percent of released inmates in California return to prison within five years.

But no time is more crucial than the first 48 hours they are free.

"Transition can be very difficult," says Matt Powers, general manager of the Prison Industry Authority, which provides skills training and jobs to prisoners while they are behind bars. "You have to get them working or else they'll be right back in jail."

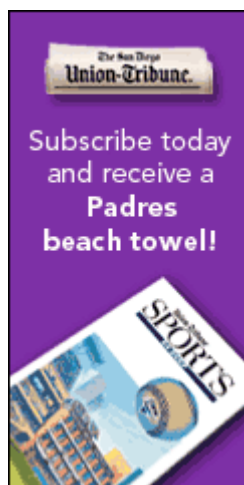
PIA, which runs factories staffed by inmates at 22 state prisons, is asking San Diego employers to step up and give ex-offenders jobs when they leave prison. PIA is a self-funded program that sells products made inside the prison walls.

In an experimental program, PIA works with San Diego employers to jump-start the hiring of former prisoners, who it says have job skills sought in the outside world.

"We don't want them back in prison," Powers says. "These are people who have skills, work experience and are highly motivated. We think they have a lot to offer the community."

Woody Breece, hiring manager at National Steel & Shipbuilding Co., says about 20 percent of the shipyard's 4,200 blue-collar workers have some sort of criminal conviction in their past.

"This is just the population we work with," Breece said. "We have a lot of turnover, so we're always looking for good workers. As long as the people we hire obey our rules and do good work, there are no problems."



NASSCO is one of the employers PIA hopes will begin hiring some of the 600 inmates from its program who enter the outside world each year. PIA is holding an employers forum Oct. 20 in San Diego and expects 150 companies to participate.

Smith was one of the 6,000 inmates working at a PIA job. He learned electrical engineering, eventually working with an outside contractor on a job at Solano State Prison.

"I was lucky because the contractor said he would give me a job if I ever got out, based on how I had worked for him," Smith says. "I could get a job making a lot more money, but this guy took a chance on me and I want to show him how I appreciate his trust."

PIA offers job-skill certification programs in fields such as welding, woodworking, optical manufacturing, dairy pasteurization, machining and electronics.

Another San Diego company, Second Chance/Strive, has been working to find jobs for former prisoners for five years.

But Scott Silverman, the chief executive of the company, says it takes more than just a job to help inmates adjust to the outside world.

"Take someone who has been in prison five or six years," he says. "That's a long gap in your employment history, and it's hard to gloss over that. Add to that you may not have had good job-seeking skills or good work performance in the past and that creates a problem."

His Second Chance program assesses prisoners while they are still behind bars, escorts them from prison the day they are released, provides housing and transportation for 60 days, enrolls them in a class to help them learn job-search and interviewing skills, and then counsels them for the next two years.

"You've got to do that," Silverman says. "Otherwise, these transitions are very difficult."

He estimates that two-thirds of employers won't even consider hiring ex-offenders.

"In the post 9/11 world, security concerns have made it even harder for ex-offenders," he says. "But we believe we have people who can be good, productive workers in the right environment."

Second Chance's prison re-entry program handles nearly 200 prisoners a year, but Silverman says there is a larger population of former inmates who need assistance.

Powers says his goal to make an immediate impact, cutting recidivism by 5 to 10 percent.

For him to do that, he says, employers need to keep an open mind and hire ex-offenders when their job skills meet hiring needs.

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